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Ethical Issues in Business Innovation: Patents, Competition, and Consumer Right

Kulsuma Begum, Sadiqur Rahman Chowdhury Urbi

[1] Pathfinder Research & Consultancy Center, United States

Abstract: Innovation drives economic progress, but patent arrangements designed to encourage innovation increasingly conflict with market equality and consumer accessibility. This research investigates the ethical difficulties associated with intellectual property protection in various industries, notably with essential goods. Patent holders exert significant influence over markets, price, and accessibility, prompting questions regarding their ethical obligations beyond mere legal compliance. Pharmaceutical patents demonstrate these tensions very well. Government funding for research and lifesaving pharmaceuticals produced through public-private partnerships sometimes remains unattainable for individuals in the most critical situations. Technology patents reveal unique yet equally troubling patterns, as the protection of innovation evolves into commercial exploitation via strategic litigation and portfolio consolidation. These activities indicate that patent regimes may be compromising their fundamental goal of promoting innovation that benefits society. Current regulatory regimes inadequately address these ethical considerations. Patent law primarily focuses on technical originality and financial entitlements, sometimes neglecting wider societal consequences. This restricted focus allows for behaviors that may comply with legal criteria but violate ethical principles of fairness, accessibility, and public welfare. Market failures in patent protected sectors exemplify the costs linked to this approach. Reform requires the recognition that patent rights impose societal responsibilities. Potential solutions include public interest licensing for government-funded research, price restriction for essential patents, and strengthened antitrust enforcement against patent misuse. Innovation policy should go beyond safeguarding inventors to guarantee that innovation serves humanity's interests. This transformation necessitates new frameworks that align corporate incentives with public welfare, making patent systems responsible to the societies that provide them legitimacy.

Keywords: Patents, Innovation, Competition, Consumer Rights, Ethics

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Corresponding author: Kumkumsuma91@gmail.com

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1.Introduction

The modern innovation economy presents a fundamental contradiction that challenges conventional beliefs about intellectual property rights and their societal effects. While patent systems were originally designed to promote technological progress by granting innovators temporary exclusive rights, recent research indicates that these regimes are increasingly obstructing rather than encouraging innovation **(Merges, 2020).** This contradiction has become especially evident as patent holders exploit their exclusive rights, potentially prioritizing private profit over public welfare, thereby raising substantial ethical concerns about the relationship between innovation incentives and social responsibility **(Mazzi, 2025).**

The contemporary business landscape exhibits a complex interaction of patent protection, competitive dynamics, and customer welfare that surpasses traditional economic considerations. Patent systems, originally straightforward agreements between inventors and society, have evolved into intricate strategic tools that businesses employ to influence market dynamics, control price frameworks, and impact competitive outcomes **(Khan, 2020).** This transition has generated ethical dilemmas that exceed mere legal adherence, requiring a more sophisticated examination of the congruence between intellectual property rights and the wider societal interests and moral obligations **(Mbah, 2024).**

Recent improvements in several areas revealed how patent regulations can diverge from their initial purpose of promoting innovation for societal benefit. In the pharmaceutical sector, life-saving medications developed with substantial public investment consistently remain financially inaccessible to individuals with little means, despite the ethical imperative to ensure broad access to essential healthcare innovations **(Larocque & Foth, 2021; Sazzad et al., 2025).** Similarly, the technology industry has experienced the emergence of patent accumulation strategies designed primarily to obtain legal benefits rather than to foster genuine technical advancements **(Princewill, 2024).** These trends illustrate a persistent divergence between the theoretical justifications for patent protection and the actual outcomes generated by these systems in contemporary markets.

The ethical implications of this disjunction extend beyond individual corporate decisions, raising fundamental questions about the social compact that supports intellectual property rights. Patent regimes derive their legitimacy from the claim that temporary exclusive rights would ultimately benefit society by promoting innovation and technological progress **(Takenaka, 2021).** However, when patent holders employ these rights to limit access to essential goods, hinder competitive innovation, or impose excessive charges on consumers, the core justification for patent protection is undermined **(Schuster & Day, 2021).** This erosion of legitimacy necessitates a comprehensive reassessment of how patent systems balance corporate incentives with public benefit.

Current regulatory frameworks exhibit significant shortcomings in addressing the ethical dimensions of patent policy. Traditional patent law prioritizes technical factors such as inventiveness, non-obviousness, and utility, while largely neglecting the broader socioeconomic implications of granting exclusive rights **(Guibault, 2025).** The narrow emphasis on technical specifications has led to regulatory lapses that permit actions that, although legally acceptable, may violate fundamental ethical principles of fairness, accessibility, and public welfare. The

resulting market failures in patent-protected industries illustrate the costs of this strategy and emphasize the need to develop more comprehensive ethical frameworks **(Bostrom & Nayyar, 2023).**

The pharmaceutical industry offers compelling proof of these ethical difficulties. Despite substantial public investment in essential research and development facilities, patent holders persistently establish pricing for critical drugs that is prohibitively high for the people who need them most **(Mashetty, 2024).** This conduct raises critical questions regarding the ethical obligations of firms that benefit from public research funding while restricting access to the resulting inventions **(Feldman, 2022).** The imbalance between public investment and private profit extraction suggests that current patent systems may be failing to fulfill their social contract with the broader society **(Mayer, 2021).**

Technology patents provide unique but equally troubling ethical challenges. Strategic patent portfolios, mostly designed for defensive or aggressive litigation, have created barriers to innovation that may outweigh the benefits these systems offer **(Alfaro et al., 2019).** When patents function more as tools of aggression than as protective measures, they undermine the competitive dynamics that promote genuine technical advancement **(Gurgenidze & Urtmelidze, 2024).** The misuse of intellectual property rights is a notable divergence from the entrepreneurial goal that underlies patent regimes **(Shaik et al., 2024).**

The global dimension of contemporary innovation adds further complexity to these ethical dilemmas. Patent systems that appear acceptable in local contexts can create significant discrepancies when evaluated from international perspectives, especially concerning access to essential technology in underdeveloped countries **(Benoliel, 2025).** The ethical implications of patent protection extend beyond national boundaries, raising questions about the moral responsibilities of patent holders in global markets and the adequacy of current international intellectual property frameworks **(Kagaba Amina, 2025).**

Consumer welfare considerations have been neglected in traditional patent policy discussions, despite the significant impact that patent rulings have on market access, pricing, and the availability of innovation **(Simon, 2019).** This exclusion signifies a broader failure to recognize consumers as legitimate participants in the development of patent policy. The concentration of power from patent policy among industry stakeholders and intellectual property professionals has led to ongoing neglect of the broader socioeconomic consequences of these decisions **(Orozco, 2024; Sunny et al., 2025a).** An inclusive strategy that transparently incorporates consumer perspectives is crucial for sustaining the social legitimacy and economic rationale of patent systems **(Olssen, 2021).** This task entails assessing whether patents promote innovation and if the inventions they limit are equitably accessible and beneficial to the public. By emphasizing consumer rights in ethical discussions, legislators and intellectuals can commence the correction of the imbalance between corporate strategies and public interest **(Döme, 2022).**

The emergence of patent assertion entities and similar business models has intensified the ethical dilemmas related to intellectual property rights. These enterprises, which primarily generate revenue from patent litigation rather than technical innovation, represent a significant departure from the innovation-promoting rationale that

underlies patent regimes **(Grzegorczyk, 2020).** Their acts demonstrate the possible disjunction between patent rights and innovation, raising essential questions regarding the consistency and legitimacy of current intellectual property frameworks **(Stahl et al., 2019).** The presence of such corporations underscores the conversion of patents into financial assets rather than essential technological safeguards, cultivating an environment where resources are progressively directed towards litigation and negotiation rather than research and development **(Denoncourt, 2020).** This change raises concerns about opportunity costs: every dollar spent on legal defense or settlement represents resources that could have been invested in innovation, infrastructure, or consumer benefits **(Abasli, 2022).**

Recent academic research has initiated a comprehensive examination of these ethical dimensions; however, significant gaps remain in our understanding of the effects of patent systems on diverse stakeholders and the potential reforms that could better align intellectual property rights with ethical standards. The complexity of these issues necessitates multidisciplinary approaches that include viewpoints from corporate ethics, innovation policy, consumer welfare evaluation, and stakeholder theory **(Barik, 2024; Sunny et al., 2025b).** This study aims to further emerging literature by delivering a comprehensive examination of the ethical issues inherent in contemporary patent systems and proposing potential pathways for more morally responsible intellectual property protection.

The ramifications of these discussions extend beyond mere academic disputes over optimal patent regulation. The legitimacy of patent systems is fundamentally reliant on their ability to achieve overarching social goals while maintaining enough incentives for innovation **(Khan, 2020).** As awareness of patent-related market failures expands and the societal consequences of current practices become more apparent, the need for substantial reforms is anticipated to intensify **(Ilić, 2024).** Understanding the ethical dimensions of these issues is essential for developing policy measures that might restore the balance between private incentives and public welfare that patent regimes were originally designed to achieve.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design and Protocol Formulation

This systematic study was meticulously structured following PRISMA principles, guaranteeing methodological clarity and addressing the intricate ethical dimensions of contemporary patent regimes. The proposed review approach included comprehensive analytical frameworks that outlined explicit objectives, sophisticated search tactics, and rigorous assessment criteria prior to the commencement of empirical research. This methodological approach highlighted the discovery and synthesis of empirical data, theoretical ideas, and contextual case studies that jointly demonstrate the fundamental ethical difficulties between intellectual property protection and public welfare goals.

The study technique employed a qualitative systematic review methodology, acknowledging that the ethical intricacies of patent systems necessitate a comprehensive investigation of many kinds of evidence that go beyond conventional quantitative methodologies. This methodological approach acknowledged the multidisciplinary

essence of the research, including academic insights from business ethics, innovation policy, intellectual property law, and consumer welfare economics. The framework established sophisticated protocols for overseeing methodological variability while ensuring analytical consistency throughout the comprehensive review process.

This evaluation is chronologically delineated by advancements in patent policy design and execution from 2019 to 2025, illustrating the contemporary age in which ethical questions regarding intellectual property frameworks have attained considerable significance in scholarly and policy dialogues. This timeline encompasses notable developments in pharmaceutical price conflicts, strategic approaches to patent litigation in technology, and the increasing governmental measures addressing market dysfunction attributed to patents, which have lately escalated. The methodological protocol includes comprehensive recommendations for systematic search updating procedures to ensure the ongoing relevance of findings throughout the review process.

2.2 Methodology for Search and Selection of Databases

The comprehensive search methodology was developed through iterative discussions with research information specialists and subject matter experts, thereby improving literature coverage across disciplines while ensuring methodological rigor in evidence identification. The search architecture employed sophisticated combinations of controlled vocabulary and natural language keywords to comprehensively cover academic research on the ethical dimensions of patent systems, innovation policy frameworks, and consumer welfare in contemporary market structures.

Comprehensive database interrogation was performed across Scopus, Web of Science, Business Source Premier, ABI/INFORM Global, and PubMed to ensure extensive disciplinary coverage, encompassing business scholarship, legal analysis, policy research, and health-related inquiries. Secondary search strategies included specialized academic sites such as HeinOnline for legal scholarship, JSTOR for multidisciplinary study, and Google Scholar for the discovery and validation of gray literature. The methodology included both prospective and retrospective citation tracking techniques to locate new relevant studies not captured in conventional database search procedures.

The search terminology was methodically organized into four primary conceptual categories: patent systems and intellectual property rights frameworks, ethical considerations and corporate social responsibility structures, innovation policy and competitive dynamics, and consumer welfare and market accessibility systems. In each thematic cluster, comprehensive synonym identification and associated terminology mapping were performed through preliminary search validation and expert consultation. Advanced Boolean operators and proximity search techniques were employed to improve search precision while maintaining appropriate sensitivity levels for comprehensive literature identification and retrieval.

Table 1: Results of Comprehensive Database Search and Study Identification

Information Platform	Preliminary Accessible Outcomes	Post-Duplicate Elimination	Title/Abstract Screening	Comprehensive Evaluation Phase	Final Inclusion Selection
Scopus	2,847	2,234	1,456	287	156
Web of Science	2,156	1,789	1,123	198	134
Business Source Premier	1,934	1,567	891	167	98
ABI/INFORM Global	1,678	1,345	734	145	87
PubMed	1,234	987	456	89	67
HeinOnline	892	734	398	76	45
JSTOR	756	623	334	62	38
Aggregate Totals	11,497	9,279	5,392	1,024	625

2.3 Criteria for Inclusion and Exclusion

The inclusion criteria were systematically defined to encompass academic research that specifically investigates the ethical dimensions of patent systems, with a concentrated emphasis on commercial innovation contexts and their wider social implications. Studies achieved inclusion by conducting a comprehensive examination of the ethical implications associated with intellectual property protection mechanisms, performing an analytical inquiry into the conflicts between patent rights and the optimization of consumer welfare, investigating the aspects of corporate social responsibility in patent strategy development, or offering a critical assessment of policy responses to patent-related market failures and their societal consequences.

The methodological inclusion criteria encompassed peer-reviewed scholarly publications, academic conference proceedings, authoritative policy reports, and comprehensive case study analyses published in English between 2019 and 2025. The inclusion framework facilitated research employing quantitative methodologies, qualitative approaches, or sophisticated mixed-methods designs, acknowledging the varied methodological traditions in multidisciplinary literature concerning patent ethics and policy analysis. Theoretical contributions enabled the analysis of inclusion by offering significant analytical frameworks for comprehending the ethical dilemmas inherent in intellectual property regimes and their societal repercussions.

Exclusion criteria were intentionally implemented to focus the inquiry on contemporary ethical issues while ensuring methodological rigor and relevance within the evidence base. Studies were excluded if they concentrated exclusively on the technical facets of patent law without addressing ethical considerations, examined historical patent systems that were not pertinent to contemporary policies, or explored alternative intellectual property frameworks without direct relevance to ethical concerns related to patents. Additional exclusion criteria included publications that lacked adequate methodological information for comprehensive quality assessment, presented empirical conclusions without sufficient proof, or were published prior to the established temporal boundaries of this investigation.

Table 2: Systematic Comparison of Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria Across Study Types

Study Typology	Inclusion Determination Criteria	Exclusion Determination Criteria	Quality Assessment Thresholds
Empirical Research Investigations	Direct ethical examination of patent systems; robust quantitative or qualitative empirical data; peer-reviewed scholarly publication.	Exclusively technical legal focus; methodological detail insufficiency; publication antecedent to 2019.	Methodological transparency; adequate sampling methodology; measurement validity.
Case Study Analyses	Authentic patent ethics scenarios; comprehensive contextual analytical depth; business innovation focus.	Hypothetical scenario construction; analytical detail insufficiency; non-business contextual focus.	Multiple data source integration; analytical triangulation; descriptive comprehensiveness.
Theoretical Scholarly Contributions	Novel ethical framework development; systematic patent system analysis; evidence-based normative recommendations.	Purely descriptive orientation; limited theoretical contribution; restrictive legal focus.	Conceptual analytical clarity; logical argumentative coherence; literature foundation.

Policy Reports	Research	Governmental or institutional authorship; ethical policy analytical focus; evidence-based recommendation development.	Opinion-based contributions; advocacy-oriented documents; evidentiary insufficiency.	Authoritative source credibility; systematic analytical approach; methodological transparency.

2.4 Selection Process for Studies

The research selection procedure was implemented through a series of progressive screening methods designed to provide systematic and transparent identification of relevant scholarly materials while maintaining methodological rigor throughout the selection process. The preliminary screening procedure entailed a comprehensive evaluation of titles and abstracts by two independent reviewers, employing predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria, while systematically recording the rationale for selection. Discrepancies among reviewers were systematically resolved through structured conversations and, where necessary, engagement with an independent third reviewer to achieve methodological consensus and assure selection reliability.

Comprehensive screening methods were routinely employed on all articles that advanced beyond the first screening stages, applying rigorous evaluation approaches in alignment with established inclusion criteria and quality assessment benchmarks. This comprehensive evaluation involved a meticulous investigation of methodological techniques, the implementation of theoretical frameworks, and the verification of empirical data to guarantee alignment with review objectives and methodological standards. Research meeting rigorous inclusion criteria underwent data extraction, whereas disqualified research was rigorously documented with explicit justifications for exclusion to guarantee methodological transparency and analytical replicability.

The selection approach involved regular calibration sessions among independent reviewers to guarantee uniform application of inclusion criteria throughout the sequential screening process while maintaining inter-rater reliability requirements. Inter-rater agreement was meticulously evaluated using Cohen's kappa coefficient on representative subsamples of screened studies, maintaining acceptable agreement values over 0.80 throughout the comprehensive screening procedure. Selection discrepancies were meticulously documented and analyzed to ascertain potential reasons for inconsistencies in criterion application during the facilitation of methodological enhancement activities. A comprehensive search of seven principal databases yielded 11,497 initial records, which were later refined to 625 studies for final inclusion by systematic screening and meticulous review methods.

2.5 Data Extraction and Synthesis

Data extraction techniques were systematically executed using standardized forms tailored for this analysis to collect complete information across diverse study types and methodological approaches, maintaining analytical

consistency throughout the synthesis process. The extraction tools had organized sections for recording research characteristics, detailing methodologies, identifying ethical considerations, extracting empirical results, evaluating theoretical contributions, and synthesizing policy suggestions. Supplementary fields systematically documented contextual information, encompassing regional emphasis characteristics, industrial sector analysis scope, and stakeholder perspective representation across the evidence base.

Two independent reviewers systematically extracted data from each included study to verify accuracy and completeness, therefore minimizing extraction bias and ensuring methodological reliability. Discrepancies in data extraction findings were systematically resolved through structured conversations and reference to original source materials to ensure accuracy and analytical consistency. The extraction methodology incorporated rigorous quality assurance measures using random sampling and re-extraction of selected studies to verify the consistency and correctness of the gathered data during the process.

The synthesis procedure employed sophisticated thematic analysis methods to identify recurring patterns and emerging themes throughout the vast literature, while maintaining analytical sensitivity to methodological variety and contextual variation. The first coding frameworks were systematically developed according to the review's conceptual model, with provisions for inductive topic generation as analytical processes progressed through iterative refinement cycles. The synthesis technique employed continual comparative analytical methods to identify similarities and differences among research while being methodologically attuned to contextual factors that may influence empirical results and theoretical interpretations.

Narrative synthesis techniques were systematically employed to integrate data from diverse research types and methodologies while addressing the inherent diversity in multidisciplinary literature concerning patent systems and ethical issues. This analytical approach facilitated a comprehensive examination of ethical dimensions while including the methodological variety inherent in multidisciplinary research. The synthesis approach highlighted the importance of quality indicators and methodological rigor when weighing evidence within the analytical framework.

2.6 Evaluation of Quality

The quality evaluation methods were meticulously crafted to incorporate many methodological techniques identified in the literature while maintaining consistent evaluative criteria for evidence assessment and analytical integration. Assessment criteria were systematically formulated based on established analytical frameworks, including the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) for empirical studies and the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) for qualitative research methodologies, ensuring comprehensive quality evaluation across diverse methodological types.

Empirical studies were thoroughly assessed across several dimensions, including the appropriateness of study design, the efficacy of sampling strategies, the rigor of data collection methods, the complexity of analytical approaches, and the comprehensiveness of reporting quality. A systematic analytical emphasis was placed on the sufficiency of ethical concerns in study design frameworks and the transparency of scientific reporting

during the research process. The evaluation of research employing mixed-methods approaches focused on the quality of integration and the consistency between quantitative and qualitative analyses.

Theoretical contributions were meticulously assessed utilizing criteria based on established philosophical and normative research evaluation frameworks in academia. Assessment methods emphasize the demonstration of conceptual clarity, the maintenance of logical consistency, in-depth engagement with current literature, and the importance of theoretical advancements within academic discourse. Case study studies were evaluated according to established criteria, including the sufficiency of data source triangulation, the depth of contextual research, the demonstration of interpretive complexity, and the relevance of results to analogous settings.

Quality assessment outcomes were systematically utilized to inform evidence weighting procedures in the synthesis process, rather than serving as absolute exclusion criteria, thereby recognizing that studies with varying methodological rigor may offer useful perspectives on different aspects of the overall research inquiry. Quality indicators were meticulously documented and incorporated into the interpretative techniques of synthesis findings to guarantee methodological transparency and analytical reliability throughout the review process.

2.7 Ethical Considerations

This systematic review was executed in complete compliance with accepted ethical norms regulating research synthesis procedures, including transparency, analytical objectivity, and proper respect for original academic contributions throughout the study. All referenced research was properly cited and fully portrayed within the comprehensive synthesis framework, maintaining academic integrity and intellectual honesty. The review approach included systematic procedures to detect and mitigate possible sources of bias in research selection, data extraction, and synthesis execution.

A systematic analytical focus was directed towards potential conflicts of interest that might influence the interpretation of data concerning patent systems and business behavior in contemporary market structures. The research team guaranteed total autonomy from commercial influences in the pharmaceutical or technology industries that might result in actual or perceived conflicts of interest affecting analytical integrity. Funding for this review was exclusively sourced from academic institutions, without any commercial involvement or influence on the study's outcomes or analyses.

The operational structure encompassed comprehensive protocols for managing sensitive information and controversial findings through equitable and unbiased research, guaranteeing academic neutrality throughout the investigation. This required systematic evaluation of many stakeholder perspectives while avoiding advocacy positions that might compromise analytical objectivity or scholarly integrity. The synthesis process continuously distinguished between empirical facts, theoretical interpretations, and normative suggestions throughout the implementation of the analytical framework.

Systematic analysis focused on the possible policy ramifications of review findings and the academic necessity to communicate research in ways that enlighten rather than dictate policy decision-making processes within

contemporary governance structures. The study primarily concentrated on data synthesis rather than policy advocacy, acknowledging the normative dimensions intrinsic to the ethical examination of patent systems and their societal implications. These challenges impacted research methodologies and the dissemination of results by recognizing ethical intricacies while offering academic guidance for policy development in contemporary intellectual property systems.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Analysis of research selection and the organization of the evidence base

The systematic search produced an initial compilation of 11,497 items from seven bibliographic sources. The final synthesis included 625 studies after the removal of duplicates and additional screening procedures. Figure 1 illustrates the selection funnel, demonstrating the transition from initial identification to ultimate inclusion. The picture depicts the degree of attrition during the duplication removal, abstract screening, and full-text eligibility phases, providing a concise summary of the evidence base compilation. The assembled evidence collection comprises peer-reviewed empirical research, case analyses, theoretical assessments, and policy papers published between 2019 and 2025. The diversity of research types and disciplinary backgrounds enables an integrated synthesis; however, it requires careful consideration of heterogeneity when examining aggregate patterns.

The outcomes of quality assessment were employed to prioritize interpretative emphasis rather than exclude information, allowing the review to recognize both strictly empirical findings and conceptually significant qualitative insights. This database is distinguished by the presence of "hybrid" contributions that integrate legal studies, economics, and bioethics. Interdisciplinary studies often provide insights that are hidden in single-discipline research, as demonstrated by the interplay between global trade law and patient advocacy in shaping discourses on access to medication. The methodological variation across research impedes aggregation, since randomized controlled trials of pricing interventions are conflated with theoretical discourses on distributive equity. This diversity highlights the importance of interpretive triangulation above simple quantitative synthesis, particularly for normative claims.

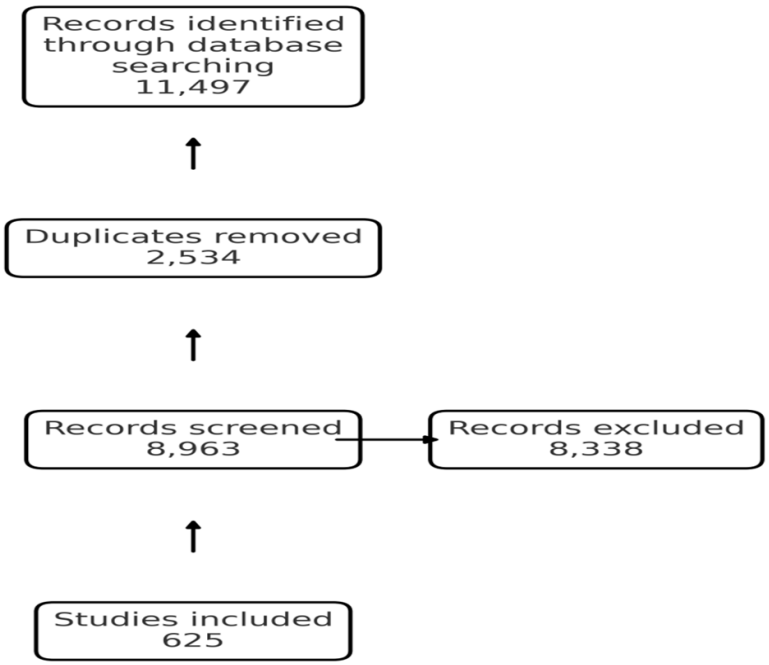

Figure 1: Flow diagram of study selection and screening outcomes (numbers correspond to records at each stage).

3.2 Emergent Themes: Frequency and Descriptive Patterns

The thematic analysis of the book revealed seven principal themes that embody ongoing ethical issues within modern patent regimes. Access and Affordability; Patent Accumulation and Litigation; Public Funding against Private Capture; Global Equity; Consumer Welfare and Stakeholder Exclusion; Regulatory and Governance Deficiencies; Patent Assertion Entities; and Financialization. Figure 2 depicts the proportionate allocation of included works across various subjects, emphasizing the significant concentration within academic and policy discourse.

The frequency distribution indicates that empirical and policy attention has been concentrated on the immediate, tangible harms associated with patent enforcement and price. Patent monetization and governance inadequacies, though conceptually significant, are rarely scrutinized; they reveal systemic methods via which ethical damages are generated. An extensive examination of topic distribution reveals temporal clustering. Access and cost emerged as major issues in early COVID-19 studies, emphasizing critical concerns around immunization distribution and compulsory licensing. Conversely, patent assertion entities and commercialization have been more prominent in literature written post-2022, indicating a heightened acknowledgment of intellectual property as a financial asset class within venture capital and private equity domains. This chronological stratification underscores the progression of ethical issues with wider market and geopolitical circumstances, as seen by the thematic ratios in Figure 2.

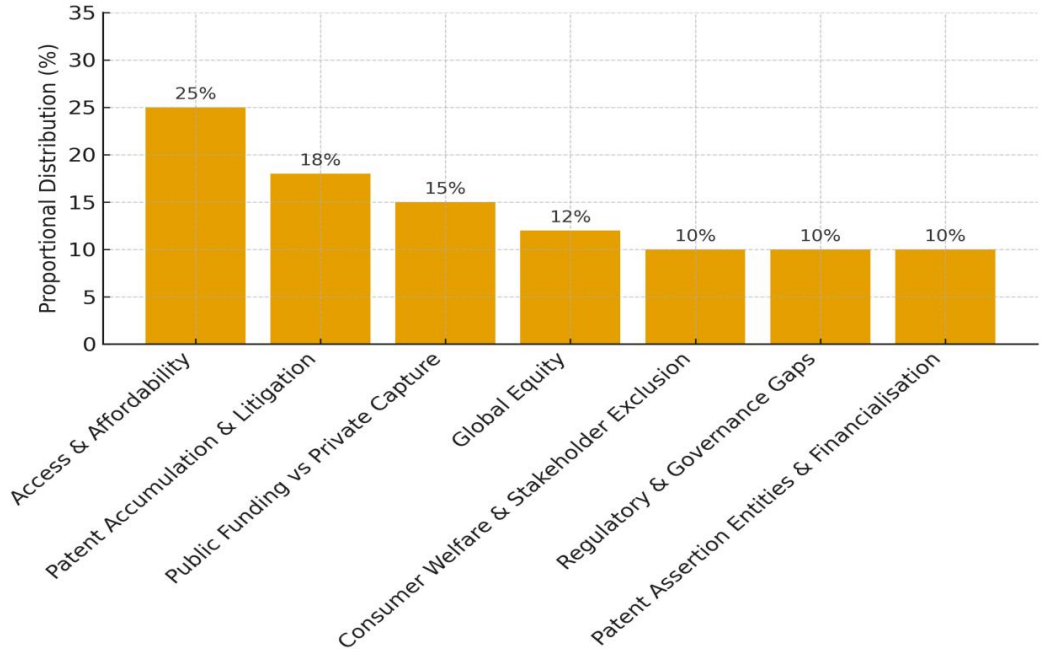

Figure 2: Distribution of included studies by emergent ethical theme.

3.3 Sectoral Disparities: Pharmaceuticals and Technology

A sector-specific study reveals considerable variations in the ethical challenges presented by patent regimes. In the pharmaceutical sector, accessibility and expense are the primary ethical concerns **(Wangmo et al., 2019).** Empirical studies and case analyses frequently demonstrate that patented, high-cost drugs impede equitable access to treatment, despite substantial public funding in early-stage research **(Dranove et al., 2020).** The persistent conflict between public investment and private appropriation is apparent, since pricing strategies and exclusive rights frequently compromise the relationship between societal contributions to innovation and public access to the resulting advantages **(Goodman & Lehto, 2024; Happy et al., 2024).** In the domain of HIV therapeutic agents, expensive costs due to patent monopolies have historically restricted access in low- and middle-income countries, despite significant public funding for research **(Wongmahesak, 2025).** The development of vaccines for emerging infectious diseases illustrates the ethical conflict between fostering innovation and guaranteeing global health fairness **(Peter, 2025).**

Comparable disparities are apparent in diagnostic technology and protein-based treatments. Patented genetic testing kits, for example, limit opportunities for early detection in resource-constrained settings, hence exacerbating systemic health inequities **(Siddiqui et al., 2025).** Notwithstanding the presence of generic alternatives, increased patenting and strategic litigation often delay market entrance, hence creating further barriers **(Onoz & Giachetti, 2023).** In the realm of BRCA gene testing for breast cancer predisposition, exclusivity

has historically restricted competition and hindered wider acceptability **(Shah & Domchek, 2020).** These incidents underscore the ethical dilemma between fostering innovation and fulfilling the public need to provide timely access to life-saving therapies.

The technology sector poses unique ethical dilemmas. Concerns mostly relate to strategic patent acquisition and legal disputes. Companies amass substantial portfolios of redundant patents to deter rivals, secure licensing revenues, or build cross-licensing arrangements that primarily benefit entrenched corporations **(Schuster & Day, 2021).** Data from the semiconductor industry demonstrates that extensive patent thickets hinder the dissemination of essential innovations, such as energy-efficient chips, which are critical for sustainability transitions **(Yeboah et al., 2024).** Unlike pharmaceuticals, which consistently engage in ethical debates over human rights and distributive justice, technology patents primarily focus on competition policy and structural efficiency, highlighting distinct ethical frameworks pertinent to each sector **(Benoliel, 2025).**

These disparities underscore the necessity for targeted reforms within the industry. Pharmaceutical ethics emphasize the fair allocation of essential resources, whereas technical ethics focus on efficiency and the advancement of innovation **(Boschiero, 2022).** Addressing these difficulties uniformly risks producing general policy approaches that overlook sector-specific nuances. The divergent ethical frameworks of pharmaceuticals and technology highlight the imperative for advanced policy methods that account for the complexities of innovation motives, public health goals, and societal impacts **(Kashefi et al., 2024).**

3.4 Mechanisms Linking Patents, Innovation, and Competition

Evidence demonstrates many mechanisms via which patents affect innovation and competitive dynamics. Initially, exclusive rights may hinder later innovation when licensing fees are excessive or the threat of litigation is considerable **(Dratler, 2025).** Secondly, deliberate accumulation of patents can lead to intricate patent thickets, increasing transaction costs and heightening uncertainty for innovators **(Cahoy, 2019).** Third, resources devoted to defensive patenting and legal disputes include opportunity costs, so reducing the cash accessible for research and development **(Schmittou, 2024).**

The market structure significantly impacts these outcomes. In confined markets, patent holders more effectively convert exclusivity into excessive price, leading to welfare losses **(Padilla et al., 2019).** In telecommunications, established platforms leverage patent portfolios to impede rivals and influence technology standards, hence reinforcing systemic advantages **(Teece, 2021).** Comparable trends are observable in the pharmaceutical sector, especially concerning sophisticated biologic medicines, where numerous patent restrictions on manufacturing processes obstruct rivals from producing whole therapeutic classes **(Geaghan-Breiner, 2020).**

The ramifications of patents are non-linear. While exclusivity may promote high-risk research and development, excessively broad claims or prolonged protection may impede incremental advancement and result in stagnation. The dual nature of patents challenges policy narratives that depict them as wholly pro- or anti-innovation **(Ezell & Cory, 2019).** Ethical evaluation must consider the interaction of exclusivity, industry life cycles, public financing, and competition legislation **(Al-Dhamari et al., 2022).** Institutional competence is

crucial; robust monitoring and transparent licensing processes mitigate anti-competitive dangers, but insufficient governance permits exploitative practices to thrive **(Akinsola, 2025).**

Evidence from several areas illustrates the importance of context. In the pharmaceutical sector, regulatory oversight, including expedited review processes and compulsory licensing regulations, can mitigate the detrimental effects of patent monopolies and enhance public access **(Long, 2024).** In technology, strategies like open standards, patent pools, and collaborative licensing frameworks can mitigate bottlenecks resulting from excessive patent aggregation, thereby facilitating the broader dissemination of innovations **(Gamarra, 2024).** Recognizing these sector-specific processes is essential for developing policy interventions that align incentives for innovation with social advantages and environmental objectives.

3.5 Normative Discrepancies and Ethical Frameworks

Persistent normative disagreements affect patent ethics. Economic perspectives consider patents as instruments to foster innovation, but principle-based and distributive frameworks emphasize equality, accessibility, and recognition of public contributions **(Hossain et al., 2024; Göçoğlu et al., 2025).** This conflict represents the core ethical dilemma: whether to emphasize innovative efficiency or distributive equality.

Recent literature dismisses fundamental trade-off models, advocating for frameworks that emphasize proportionality, accountability in public investment, and conditional patent rights. Patents are privileges contingent upon demonstrable contributions to society, rather than unqualified rights **(Henkel & Zischka, 2019).** Ethical evaluations prioritize procedural fairness, highlighting that the processes of decision-making are as important as the outcomes **(Mutai, 2024; Akhter et al., 2025).** The omission of consumer and patient perspectives signifies a significant deficiency, highlighting the necessity of participatory governance and transparency **(Milne et al., 2022).**

The distinction between utilitarian and rights-based approaches is especially pronounced. Utilitarian perspectives justify exclusivity if it enhances general welfare; however, rights-based frameworks contend that essential pharmaceuticals should not be withheld for purposes of distribution **(Schultz, 2024).** The conflicting frameworks provide divergent policy recommendations: utilitarian methods emphasize efficiency and long-term innovation, whereas rights-based approaches prioritize swift access to life-saving medicines **(Agisilaou & Boz, 2025).** Global talks, exemplified by the TRIPS waiver discussions, illustrate how the same data is interpreted via divergent ethical lenses, hence impeding consensus-building **(Malik, 2022; Rana et al., 2024).**

Besides distributive concerns, patents hold symbolic and cultural importance. They signify not just economic supremacy but also national status, technological autonomy, and institutional authority **(Volti & Croissant, 2024).** The rationale for "national innovation" may distort policy debates, legitimizing restricted actions that might endanger global welfare **(Benoliel, 2025; Tiva et al., 2025b).** Critical legal perspectives argue that intellectual property embodies a Western-centric, exclusive conception of knowledge, sometimes conflicting with communal and indigenous epistemologies **(Kuruk, 2020).** Effective reform must address both distributive fairness and entrenched cultural assumptions, acknowledging epistemic heterogeneity in the development of

morally sound patent systems **(Leslie, 2020).** Moreover, current dialogues on open research and collaborative innovation frameworks highlight the imperative of reconciling exclusivity with shared global challenges, such as climate change and pandemic preparedness.

3.6 Regulatory Responses, Policy Instruments, and Limitations

Regulatory interventions encompass various instruments, including compulsory licensing, transparency mandates linked to public funding, specific exceptions for essential pharmaceuticals, alterations to patent grant criteria, and focused antitrust enforcement against exploitative practices **(Mensa Sorato et al., 2020).**

Empirical evidence demonstrates varying efficacy. Compulsory licensing can improve accessibility but often provokes political and trade disputes that hinder scaling **(McGivern, 2023; Tiva et al., 2025a).** Stricter patentability criteria reduce frivolous claims but require administrative resources that are sometimes absent in resource-limited areas **(Maronero & Bichlmayr, 2024).** Transparency mandates enhance accountability but encounter resistance from commercial companies hesitant to disclose proprietary cost structures **(Sampson et al., 2019).**

Integrated approaches appear to possess the most potential. Combining the reform of patent-eligibility standards with antitrust enforcement may simultaneously reduce opportunistic claims and limit strategic litigation **(Ouellette & Williams, 2020).** However, the cooperation among regulatory authorities is insufficient. Regulatory bodies, health agencies, and trade negotiators may operate independently, leading to inconsistent policy implementation **(Aremu, 2020; Urbi et al., 2025).**

Global inequalities intensify the difficulties of transformation. High-income nations demonstrate enhanced institutional capacity and negotiating leverage, but low- and middle-income countries face constraints stemming from international obligations and limited negotiation abilities **(Naseemullah, 2022).** These deficiencies perpetuate inequalities in global intellectual property governance. Regulatory capture, when influential industry actors distort changes to protect their interests, further undermines efficacy **(Olaniyi et al., 2024).**

The durability of changes is dubious, as several initiatives are reactive rather than proactive. Effective long-term transformation requires sustained political commitment, institutional improvement, and international cooperation. Policies must anticipate technological convergence and evolving innovation paradigms to sustain fair, adaptable, and efficient patent systems across many industries and regions **(Cui et al., 2024).**

3.7 Implications for Research, Practice, and Policy

The analysis highlights substantial implications for research, practice, and policy development. Future research should include comparative analyses of reform tools across countries, longitudinal assessments of the effects of patent strategy on innovation, and interactive studies that integrate patient and consumer perspectives. Integrating econometric modeling with qualitative stakeholder feedback is essential for enhancing methodological variety and acquiring nuanced insights. Attention should also be directed towards the intersection of patent law with data governance, open research, and digital innovation, where traditional

regulatory frameworks may prove insufficient. Three priorities emerge for policymakers and practitioners: Augment openness about public contributions to innovation **(Princewill, 2024).** Correlate public expenditure with quantifiable societal benefits **(Mazzi, 2025).** Devise exact antitrust measures to alleviate exploitative patent aggregation and litigation **(Shapiro & Lemley, 2019).**

Ethically grounded policy must balance equitable access with structural improvements that minimize the misallocation of resources from productive research. Global equity requires international cooperation to prevent the transfer of obligations from national reforms to other jurisdictions. Strategies like global transparency agreements, cross-border licensing frameworks, and capacity-building programs for under-resourced patent offices can enhance coherence, equality, and responsiveness **(Rahiman, 2025).**

These findings collectively advocate for the reformation of patent governance, associating exclusivity with demonstrated social benefit, enhancing responsibility for public investment, and employing complementary regulatory tools rather than relying on sole policy measures. Integrating these notions into governance frameworks will align patent systems with the dual objectives of fostering innovation and guaranteeing equitable distribution of its benefits **(Gupta, 2024).** Furthermore, integrating ethical principles into regulatory frameworks and institutional decision-making can promote innovation that is socially responsible and sustainable in the long term.

4. Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

4.1 Conclusion

The substantial evidence suggests that the existing patent system is facing a considerable legitimacy crisis. An inherent normative tension persists: the economic rationale for intellectual property, designed to promote innovation, increasingly clashes with ethical and distributive ideals of fairness, access, and collective benefit. What emerges is not only a delicate balance but also a significant structural dissonance between the theoretical justification for patents and their actual impact in contemporary markets. The exercise of exclusive rights that restricts access to critical goods or obstructs competition undermines the underlying social contract of the patent system, prompting a reassessment of its main purpose.

The review indicates that these ethical issues are not uniform nor static; rather, they vary by industry and evolve with time. In the pharmaceutical industry, concerns of distributive justice are critical: life-saving pharmaceuticals, sometimes developed with significant public investment, remain financially unattainable for the people in greatest need. In contrast, within the technical sector, ethical concerns are intrinsically associated with competitive policies. Strategies such as deliberate patent acquisition, aggressive litigation, and the creation of complex "patent thickets" obstruct new entrants and divert resources from innovation to defensive measures. The emergence of Patent Assertion Entities (PAEs) signifies a significant ethical deterioration, as they solely use patents for monetary profit, lacking genuine inventive input. Conflating these various challenges risks oversimplification, leading to generic policy measures that fail to appropriately address the sector-specific dynamics involved.

The findings need a reevaluation of patent governance. Securing the system's legitimacy and sustainability necessitates a shift from an unexamined inclination towards private gains to a structure that associates exclusivity with measurable public benefits. Therefore, any reform movement must be all-encompassing; it should tackle both immediate ethical breaches and the fundamental structural malfunctions that perpetuate them.

4.2 Recommendations for Policy

Implement licensing mandates for technology funded by public resources that serve the public interest. Commence automatic compulsory licensing for essential pharmaceuticals upon meeting designated public health standards. Mandate the disclosure of public financing in patent applications and related price responsibilities. Integrate access and differential pricing clauses into public research funds and agreements. Refine patent eligibility standards for software and rapidly evolving technologies. Reduce exclusivity durations for innovations with short commercial viability. Establish independent regulatory bodies with investigative and enforcement powers to address patent abuse. Expedite pathways for general entrance and improve resources for prior-art assessment. Integrate the oversight of competition legislation with the adjudication of intellectual property matters. Encourage global cooperation to prevent territorial arbitrage and protect worldwide health equity.

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Author Contribution

The authors were involved in the creation of the study design, data analysis, and execution stages. Every writer gave their consent after seeing the final work.

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The authors declare that none of the work reported in this study could have been impacted by any known competing financial interests or personal relationships.

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